

A dream bream from the Canal

By Roy Webster

Young Boy Roy sat motionless on the bank of the canal, staring intently and unblinking into the crystal clear water streaming through the lush, green aquatic plant life.

Above him, a scorching summer sun blazed down from an azure sky, flecked by the contrasting whiteness of a cotton wool-textured spiral of spent condensation trails drifting over the south west horizon as a stark reminder of the fierce aerial battles being fought above the nation's capital city.

In the adjacent cornfields, muscular Shire horses, yoked and harnessed to four-wheeled wagons, snorted and sweated under the strain of hauling towering loads of upstanding twine bound oat sheaves to the stack yard

Half a dozen men, stripped to the waist and brown as berries, and two sun burnt cockney land army girls, less scantily clad in khaki, toiled unflinchingly in the searing, arid climate of one of the hottest summers of the 20th century. They were efficiently gathering the vital animal and human food harvest to be threshed by antiquated steam-driven machinery when the days shortened.

It was the memorable year of 1940 and one of the most important periods of our Island's history, when the Battle of Britain in the skies would be won by the Allies' valiant fighter plane pilots against almost overwhelming odds to relieve the cities and towns of the ruthless and devastating bombardment by the pitiless German Luftwaffe.

Yet The Boy was utterly oblivious to it all and, even when a Nazi Dornier bomber that had strayed off course was engaged overhead in a dogfight by an RAF Coltishall Spitfire, the staccato sound of machine guns that sent the muttering moorhens scattering for cover, his waterside vigil by the ancient Tonnage Bridge that shadowed the tapering army Ack Ack gun, never wavered.

He was waiting for The Fish – that very special specimen he had spotted idling among the streamer weeds and lilies, coming to rest in the clearing beneath his feet, before it was disturbed by the racket overhead.

The fish was a monster bream, bigger than any he had ever seen caught from the Dilham, North Walsham canal by his father, or anyone else for that matter. For an hour, which seemed more like a day, the seven-year-old waited patiently, encouraged by the moorhens that were breaking cover again and the arrival of a solitary heron fishing for its dinner on the far bank

Suddenly, the lily pads by him quivered almost imperceptibly, or did he just imagine it? But surely the pair of mottled brown dragonflies, resting on the yellow lily flower head, had been disturbed by something?

Indeed they had, for 10 seconds later the giant scaled bronze brown flanks of the fish of his boyhood dreams nosed into the clearing, accompanied by two of its smaller more silver coloured cousins.

Hastily, the fattest, juiciest garden lob worm was selected from the bait can and pinned on the sturdy black eel hook. And, supported by a bright red-tipped swan quill float, the bait was lowered gently on stout woven thread in front of the prey. This great fish swam the full circle, eyeing the wriggling morsel of food then moved in swiftly to gulp down the wriggler before the two smaller fish could attack it.

With a mighty heave on the ancient cane fishing rod, the hooked fish flew over the exited Boy's right shoulder for a soft landing in the bankside undergrowth. Gently, the thrilled youngster managed to control his shaking hands that were now targeted by relentless stinging nettles, to remove the hook from the rubbery lips. Transfixed, he gazed on his dream fish with a heady euphoria of delight and sheer disbelief.

Some of the workers strolled over to admire the massive fish. "Is it a plaice? One of the London land girls wondered. "No, it's the biggest bream I ever saw from here, it must be a five pounder," cried the farm foreman Bob, rushing to his nearby home for the kitchen scales.

The pointer rested on 5 lbs 12oz, a truly marvellous specimen of Canal bream, even in those halcyon days of pure streams before toxic sewerage effluent began to exact its heavy toll on the aquatic flora and fauna.

As for the proud young angler, he gazed lovingly with tearful emotion at his piscatorial prize while he pondered his next move. Should he take the fish home for his Mum to pickle in vinegar and spice, a culinary process she called "sousing"? No, not this one, it was very special. And very carefully he lowered his prize specimen, which would remain engraved in his memory for ever, into the water where it swam off to rejoin the small shoal, none the worse for its experience.

The Boy returned to the scene of his triumph on several occasions and, sure enough, the giant bream, he had hooked on crude tackle by Isaak Walton's gentle art standards, was still in residence, now in deeper water following the army drag line dredger adapting the Canal into an enemy tank trap.

But, even so, this Boy now 85, never fished for the monster again because he realised he would never meet with the same excitement, catching it a second time.

Now, with plans going ahead to restore the dilapidated North Walsham Canal to its former glory, will those fabulous fishing facilities ever be revived for fresh generations of young anglers?

Only time will tell but already promising vivid red finned rudd and roach have been spotted rising for insect life on the sparkling sun drenched surface. And some of them along with spikey perch and hefty pike have actually been caught this season by keen investigative rodmen.

Thus, supported by the unstinting effort of redoubtable members of the Canal Trust and keen riparian owners, Mother Nature is steadily winning the battle against the many years of careless disinterest and neglect.

Happily, this ancient, historic man made commercial waterway appears in the process of being born again, not only as an angling hotspot but as one of Norfolk's most popular, high value, multi-cultural, recreational nature spots of magnificent biodiversity, appealing to bird watchers, ramblers, family dog walkers, canoeists and wild life lovers in general.

Picture - Roy bagging another fish mid 60's

